

## The Dreyfus Affair (L’Affaire)

In 1894 a list of French military documents (called a *bordereau*) was found in the waste paper bin of the German embassy in Paris. French counter-intelligence suspected **Captain Alfred Dreyfus**, from a wealthy Alsatian Jewish family. He was one of the few Jews on the General Staff (the **Holy of Holies**).



After an irregular court martial where documents were withheld from the defense, Dreyfus was found guilty and sentenced to **Devil’s Island** off **French Guiana**.

Very few people believed his protestations of innocence even though hand writing experts had disagreed at his trial. Documents were forged by an intelligence officer **Major Henry** to prove Dreyfus’s guilt.

There the matter might have rested but for **Colonel Picquart**. In 1896 Picquart, the new head of French counter-intelligence, realized that documents were still being passed to the Germans. He found the real culprit a **Major Esterhazy** whose handwriting was the same as that on the *bordereau*.

The War office became alarmed. They wanted to hush the affair up and Picquart was transferred to Tunisia (to a dangerous area!). But events were beginning to move in Dreyfus’s favor. Picquart confided his views while on leave to a lawyer who persuaded the leading politician **Scheurer-Kestner** to call for a retrial.

When **Matthieu Dreyfus** accused Esterhazy of being the original spy the government ordered a trial of Esterhazy. In January 1898 he was acquitted after a trial that lasted only two days.

Events took a dramatic turn when the famous author, **Emile Zola** published an open letter called “J’Accuse” in **Clemenceau**’s newspaper, *L’Aurore*. He accused the army of a mistrial and a cover up. The government reacted by prosecuting Zola for libel. He was found guilty and sentenced to one year in prison.



Public opinion in France was now bitterly divided. **The affair reflected the divisions in French society.**

**For supporters of Dreyfus or Dreyfusards the fate of an innocent man was at stake, some also saw it as an ideal opportunity for a campaign against the enemies of the republic. They were mainly anti-clericals, freemasons and intellectuals (writers, artists).** The socialist leader **Jean Juares** was a supporter of Dreyfus.

For **anti-dreyfusards**, the honor of France and the army was more important than the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus. They saw Dreyfusards as unpatriotic and opposed to everything they held dear. Many were **anti-Semitic** and felt that Jews were not loyal to France. Anti-Jewish riots broke out in many towns including **Algiers**.

Anti-Dreyfusards consisted of the Army, monarchists and Catholics. The **Assumptionist Order** and its newspaper, *La Croix*, played a prominent role in the campaign against Dreyfus.

In the summer of 1898, the new war minister hoped to prove once and for all the guilt of Dreyfus. He put Picquart on trial and made a speech to parliament outlining the case against Dreyfus. However it was discovered

that some of the written evidence against Dreyfus was forged. **Major Henry**, under questioning, confessed and committed suicide.

The case was referred to the appeal court. In June 1899 after a number of delays a new trial was decided. Dreyfus was brought back from Devil's Island "white-haired and broken." (Cobban) He was again found guilty but with extenuating circumstances and he was given a presidential pardon. In 1906 he was exonerated completely. He served honorably in World War One and died in 1935.

The affair had bitterly divided France and it seemed that the system was on the verge of collapse. In 1899 a government of **Republican Defense** was formed led by **Waldeck-Rousseau**. *The major result of the affair was a renewed outbreak of anti-clericalism.*

## The Struggle between Church and State

These notes may also be used to prepare questions on Church-State relations in Germany and France.

### Note

Anti-Clericalism refers to measures that were taken to reduce the power of the church, usually in the area of education.

**Relations between Church and State in France had been regulated by the Concordat of 1801. By this agreement the state paid the salaries of priests and nominated bishops.**

### Reasons for the dispute:

Historically the Catholic Church was identified with the Monarchy and conservative forces in France. This was especially true during the French revolution when hundreds of priests were guillotined for their opposition to the First Republic. Because of this most Catholics were monarchists and opposed the Third Republic.	Liberals, especially the Radical party, as throughout the rest of Europe, saw the Church as the main threat to individual liberty and an enemy of progress.	The main area of struggle between Church and State was education where the Church exercised a large measure of control. It was felt that Church control of education had prevented the development of a modern system of education that existed in France's great rival, Germany.	As the clergy were in the main monarchist, the government feared their influence on the educational system.
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The main Catholic groups in French society were:

- The Aristocracy
- The wealthier Middle-classes
- Higher government officials in the Army and the Civil Service
- Peasants in the regions listed above.

The dispute between Church and State grew increasingly bitter. It reflected the very deep divisions present in French society during the Third Republic, especially during the **Dreyfus affair (l'Affaire)** of the 1890s.

**Between 1879 (when the Anti-Clericals took power) and 1914 there was not a single Catholic minister or head of state.**